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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 STRASBOURG 000027

SIPDIS

STATE ALSO FOR EUR/WE

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SUBJECT: STRASBOURG AND ISLAM: MOVES FORWARD; DISCRIMINATION STILL EXISTS

CLASSIFIED BY: Vincent Carver, CG, Strasbourg, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

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11. (C)Strasbourg City Hall takes an pro-active approach toward the Muslim communities in the city, including via political and financial support for the construction of a new Grand Mosque. Our Muslim interlocutors are split along generational lines when they discuss discrimination - with young people generally perceiving little or no anti-Muslim sentiment in this eastern French city while their elders complain of informal discrimination. There apparently are limits to Strasbourg's "official" tolerance, with a Deputy Mayor telling us that the city will "never" authorize the prayer to call to be broadcast from minarets. END SUMMARY

NOT ONE HOMOGENEOUS GROUP

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12. (C) While French government institutions do not identify citizens and residents according to their faith, the Strasbourg City Hall told us it estimates that Muslims make up approximately ten percent of Strasbourg's population, with the vast majority being first- and second-generation Moroccans. Those from (or with parents from) Algeria and Tunisia follow, with Turks being the fourth largest component. Almost all are Sunni. City Hall noted to us that one must talk of "communities," rather than one homogenous Islamic group. According to Olivier Bitz, Deputy Mayor for Religious Affairs, there are 24 identifiable groups within these communities - some self-identified by national origin, others simply affiliated by neighborhood. In any case, Bitz stressed that his role is to ensure that all citizens and residents of Strasbourg are able to practice their religion and remain free from discrimination based on religion.

CITY FINANCIAL SUPPORT

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13. (C) Bitz explained that City Hall recognizes the post-September 11 realities, including regarding mainstream French questioning of the role of Islam in France. One way to combat discrimination, he said, is to "get the prayer groups out of the cellars." This is a major reason why Mayor Ries (whose principal deputy is a Muslim woman of Moroccan parents) supports, both politically and financially, the construction of a new Grand Mosque. (Note: the current "Grand Mosque" is anything but "grand" in its aging building at the end of a dead-end street.) While Islam is not one of the religions covered by the 1905 Concordat (which remains law in Alsace and Lorraine), City Hall extends similar financial subsidies to Islamic religious projects, including for the current construction of the Grand Mosque, as it goes for Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic institutions. Thus far, Bitz added, Ries' political opponents have not publicly questioned such subsidies, although some opponents had blocked earlier efforts to construct a new mosque.

"TOLERANCE," UP TO A POINT

14. (C) After some probing, Bitz acknowledged that there remain "some concerns" about potential extremists. He said the "appropriate French authorities" monitor some imams' sermons and examine any foreign financing of the construction of the Grand Mosque. He noted, too, that the state keeps close watch on Mohamed Latreche, head of the Party of Muslims in France (PMF) and a long-time resident of a Strasbourg suburb (who was one of the protagonists behind relatively small yet vocal anti-Israel and anti-Zionist protests in Strasbourg during the Gaza confrontation). Bitz admitted that, while eventually the Grand Mosque would add a minaret to the Strasbourg skyline, the authorities "would never" permit the prayer to call to be broadcast from it, even as church bells continue to ring throughout the city.

MUSLIMS: SPLIT ALONG GENERATIONAL LINES

15. (SBU) In our admittedly unscientific sampling of opinions of Muslims living here, we have found that those, generally aged 50 and over and mainly born outside France, view Strasbourg society as discriminatory against them. Driss Ayachour, President of the Regional Council of Muslims, and Said Aalla, President of the current Grand Mosque, have told us that Muslims face a difficult opponent - informal discrimination, not from current city officials, but from regular citizens. Younger people, however, have told us that they have experienced little or no discrimination, including in education, employment, and business contracts. (We note that some of the media report that the number of Muslims among the prison population in this part of France is disproportionately large; otherwise, possible discrimination based on religion is not a widely covered topic in the regional media.)

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COMMENT

16. (C) City authorities have taken a more positive and pro-active approach over the past few years toward Muslims living here. These authorities want to "demystify" their Muslim residents for the rest of the citizens. One major way has been their support for the construction of the Grand Mosque. Leaders of other major religions here - Catholic, Lutheran, other Protestant, and Jewish - also support the construction as a method of further integrating Muslims into Strasbourg society. That said, Bitz' comments about surveillance demonstrate that the State also remains aware that extremists could threaten the relative spirit of tolerance in this city. And while older generations of Muslims may feel discrimination, we also note that some non-Muslims living here, when speaking privately to us, acknowledge mistrust of their Muslim neighbors. One new Grand Mosque is a great step forward - on a lengthy path toward dispelling the religious-based discrimination that still exists here.

CARVER